Cryptozoology, 9, 1990, 41–51
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SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY AND THE PLACE OF THE YAHOO IN AUSTRALIAN ZOOLOGICAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT: Discovery is an extended process in which observation needs to be accompanied by the necessary conceptualization. The Yahoo (or Australian "gorilla") may be seen as an unresolved anomaly set against a background involving such anomalies as platypus eggs, marsupial birth, the African gorilla, and the Queensland lungfish.

INTRODUCTION

In an influential account of how change in scientific thinking actually occurs, Thomas Kuhn (1970: 1–3) has called for an historiographic revolution in the study of science. According to Kuhn, history could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we are now possessed, an image drawn from a study of finished scientific achievements.

Scientific method has often been regarded as the process by which items have been added to the stockpile of knowledge, while the history of science is the discipline that chronicles this accumulation. The task of the historian then appears to be to determine when and by whom each scientific fact was discovered. The historical record of the research activity will, however, reveal a quite different picture, one in which the questions "when" and "by whom" discoveries were made are seen as symptomatic of an erroneous view of what constitutes science. An analysis of discovery will also emphasize the role of accident in the emergence of totally new fact, and the need to transcend the conceptual boundaries of what Kuhn calls normal science.

According to Kuhn (1970: 52–64), discoveries are complex events which demand an alteration in the way we see nature, but do not necessarily lead to a fundamental reconstruction of a field of study. Anomalies are defined by Kuhn as violations of expectation, or as phenomena for which the scientist is not prepared, rather than in terms of what is considered acceptable to science. In this way, the anomaly of one generation may be accepted by the next. For instance, the discovery of X-rays occurred by accident, and was greeted with not only surprise but also shock because the existence of X-rays violated deeply held expectations.

Prior to discovery, only what is anticipated and usual will be experienced, even where anomaly is later to be observed. Discovery therefore commences with the awareness of anomaly; that is to say that nature has somehow violated the expectations of normal science, develops through exploration of the anomaly, and concludes only with the resolution or assimilation of that anomaly. This frequently protracted and convoluted process can be seen

as a weakening of the grip of tradition upon the mind in the face of the unexpected, so that finally the anomalous becomes the expected. Observation and conceptualization are inseparably linked in discovery. Consequently, failure to recognize the existence of anomaly should be sufficient to prohibit development of discovery. On the other hand, if the adjustment of conceptual categories is prepared in advance, then the phenomenon will not be of a new sort and there will be no surprise.

The aim of the present exercise is to examine scientific attitudes towards one particular anomaly—the Yahoo or Australian "ape"—against the background of an historical re-evaluation of the discovery of other more familiar zoological phenomena.

Harper and Montgomery

Kuhn (1970: ix) discusses instances of discovery from the physical sciences, but points out that evidence for his reorientation of the nature of science also comes from the history of biological science. Kathleen Dugan has surveyed the links between observation and theoretical assumption in the development of Australian zoology, and has demonstrated weaknesses in the conventional historical view. Dugan (1980: 1) has pointed out that scientific theories had developed largely without reference to the new animals, so that theorists were confronted with a number of unexpected facts which did not fit their theoretical frame of reference. The intellectual conservatism of 19th century Australia, and the dominant position held by theorists in Europe, also meant that Australian scientists could easily overlook or discount important evidence. The history of Australian zoology therefore provides an excellent opportunity to observe the process of scientific discovery at work. A convenient point to enter a discussion about the discovery of Australian animals and their characteristics is provided by a defence of science made in a now largely-forgotten controversy which took place in 1912 around the so-called Australian "gorilla." It is therefore to this apology for 19th century zoological science, and the event which precipitated it, that we now turn.

Argument about an Australian "ape" or Yahoo had arisen sporadically throughout most of the 19th century. Despite the primate label, the matter probably should be (and indeed was) regarded as a controversy about the existence of a large and yet undiscovered marsupial. In 1912, a rare public discussion about the creature arose, by far the most significant feature of which was the publication in a Sydney newspaper of an account by the surveyor Charles Harper (Joyner 1977: 19). Harper, who claimed that he himself had encountered the animal, asserted that reports of an Australian "gorilla" had for many years past emerged from the eastern or coastal slopes of the ranges of southern New South Wales. While scientists denied its

existence, reliable men unhesitatingly asserted that they had seen this animal in the forest at short distances. They were so terrified at the sight, and the hideous noise it made, that they departed at once from the locality, leaving their tools and work done (as timber getters) behind them. Furthermore, the Aborigines of the region themselves asserted that the creature existed.

Harper's graphic description of the animal which approached his camp fire one night includes some interesting details. For instance, the phalanges of the feet were extremely long, indicating great grasping power. The mouth was equipped with two large canine teeth which protruded over the lower lip when the jaw was closed. The stomach seemed like a sack hanging halfway down the thighs. When finally the animal made off, it did so at first erect and then on all fours.

Notwithstanding the startling nature of this announcement, it produced no response of a scientific nature other than a commentary by Alexander E. Montgomery which appeared in the Sydney *Sun* for November 24, 1912, p. 13. Montgomery (1912) was a traveller turned writer whose first love, as he put it, was science. His remarks on Harper's story are worth noting, not only because they stand alone, but also because they are undoubtedly representative of 19th century scientific opinion. If we hope to learn something about scientific attitudes towards the concept of an Australian "ape" and the possibility of its existence, then Montgomery's remarks will provide almost the only clue.

Montgomery's theme concerns the correctness of zoological science in its attitude towards the apparently incredible; by this, he means more or less what Kuhn has called "anomaly." In contrast, however, Montgomery deplores the prejudice and ignorance of the non-scientist in such matters, in particular the Australian bushman. To him, science spells "enlightenment," and is therefore never dogmatic but always strictly judicial. It is simply a question of evidence. Science gives the only explanation of the phenomenon compatible with the evidence available. Produce contrary evidence, and science will modify its explanation accordingly. Montgomery illustrates his argument with several examples. It was zoologists, reasoning from analogy, who first suggested that the monotremes were oviparous, or egg-laying. It was the Australian bushman who rejected the idea, until it was conclusively demonstrated by Caldwell in 1884. Again, it was the bushman who believed that the marsupial fetus was formed upon the teat and whose preconceptions allowed him to remain unconvinced even by dissection showing the fetus in the uterus. Furthermore, it was the general public who ridiculed du Chaillu's account of the gorilla when it appeared. Science, however, recalled the close similarity with Hanno's account from the 5th century B.C. As a result, further investigation was made, and the gorilla was ultimately added to the list of major anthropoids. Finally, it is the Australian bushman who is responsible for the suggestions of what many had referred to as a "marsupial

anthropoid ape," a belief which, for reasons unstated, Montgomery cannot share.

Science and Early Australian Zoological Discovery

It can be seen at once by anyone familiar with the cases concerned that these short accounts are only loosely based on what is known of the actual discoveries. The reason for this is clear. Like most scientists, Montgomery believed that science was impartial, and that scientific discovery was methodical, being understandable in terms of evidence alone. The cases he brought forward are described in such a way as to make this appear to be true. Kuhn, however, maintains that discoveries cannot be made using the normal, cumulative procedures of science, and that, if the record of the process is examined, this will be apparent. As he puts it (Kuhn 1970: 28), the trouble with the view of science as the accumulation of evidence without prior theoretical commitment is that history offers no support for so excessively Baconian a method. Cumulative acquisition of unanticipated novelty is an almost non-existent exception to the rule of scientific development (Kuhn 1970: 96). That is to say, where discovery is concerned, it is not evidence which tends to compel, but the preconceptions common to the discipline, against which novelty emerges only with difficulty. Put even more succinctly, discovery may be irrational and need not follow any recognized method (Feyerabend 1975: 165).

The influence of prevailing theories on the interpretation of empirical data is perhaps most clearly seen in the case of 19th century attempts to explain the egg-laying mammals (Dugan 1980: 7). When the first of these (the echidna) was discovered in 1792, naturalists assumed its reproductive anatomy followed the standard placental pattern. Full dissection of the platypus in 1801 showed that its reproductive structure more closely ressembled a lizard than a bird or a mammal. This, coupled with the apparent absence of mammary glands, led to astonished speculation that the animal was oviparous. The problem could be solved only by field observation, and most reports from Australia confirmed that the monotremes laid eggs.

However, the controversy over whether or not the platypus laid eggs was essentially a taxonomic debate, one in which in which European naturalists could select or reject evidence on the basis of its agreement with their own theoretical preconceptions. Of such a kind was the debate between Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, who argued that the animals laid eggs and did not give milk, and Richard Owen, who argued that they were normal mammals giving milk and therefore producing live young. In 1834, Geoffroy conceded that the platypus gave milk and for half a century no one seriously challenged the position held by Owen that the monotremes gave birth to live young (Dugan 1980: 191–226). This erroneous opinion became so firmly established in scientific circles that reports of platypus eggs were either ignored or explained away (Dugan 1980: 8).

In 1884, monotreme eggs were found simultaneously by Wilhelm Haacke, Director of the South Australian Museum, and the British scientist William H. Caldwell. Characteristically, little notice was taken of Haacke's discovery, even in Australia, while the reaction to Caldwell's announcement was sensational. No one doubted his claim. Like other European scientists, Caldwell believed that the monotremes gave birth to their young live, and had earlier thought he had confirmation that this was so. He was presumably surprised to find he was wrong, but declined to discuss what he now considered a fact (Dugan 1987: 93–94).

Early accounts of marsupial reproduction were conflicting and confused. Many observers concluded that the young originated upon the teats. However, in 1698 Tyson gave the first detailed description of opossum anatomy. His examination revealed an internal uterus and showed that previous authorities were wrong in stating that the marsupial young originated and developed within the pouch. The persistence of this idea among Australian bushmen in the 19th century is rightly called by Montgomery the dogmatism of unenlightenment. Yet the observation does nothing to illustrate the capacity of zoological science to respond to the seemingly impossible. In fact, the record of awareness of the nature of marsupial reproduction demonstrates continuing disparity between theoretical preconceptions arising from laboratory examinations and observations in the field. For instance, Tyson erred in assuming that the opossum young developed internally until birth, at which time they had reached a stage comparable to that of new-born young in other mammals. He therefore denied that the pouch had any special function in the reproductive process.

Observers in the field could clearly see that the state of development of the new-born pouch young corresponded to that of uterine fetuses. Thus, the identification of the pouch as an external uterus fitted their observations much better than the claim that the pouch served only to protect the young after birth. European scientists, unfamiliar with living marsupials, assumed their reproductive physiology was substantially similar to that of placentals, and ascribed to ignorance all reports to the contrary (Dugan 1980: 25–44).

In 1763, the Compte de Buffon offered a two-stage theory of marsupial development which accounted for both anatomical observation in the laboratory and the appearance of the new-born young. But Buffon wrongly believed that the primitive stage of development of the marsupial young indicated that they were born prematurely. Buffon therefore resolved one anomaly, but left unresolved another, that of how a prematurely born fetus could travel from the uterus into the pouch (Dugan 1980: 45–48). Owen (1834) noticed that the living fetus was far from being the inert embryo it was supposed to be, but, influenced by the belief that it was born prematurely,

concluded that it did not have the power to move unaided from the vulva to the pouch. He rejected accounts of unaided transference and his view that removal was effected by the lips of the mother prevailed, despite evidence to the contrary. The matter was finally resolved by the Hartmans in 1920 (Troughton 1965: 15–18).

Also long deferred was definite knowledge of the route taken by the young kangaroo in passing from the uterus to the exterior. Home had suggested in 1795 that the young were born through a median passage rather than through the lateral vaginal canals. Owen (1834) denied this possibility, stating that the median canal was always closed in his specimens, and that the young must pass through the lateral canals. The question was unaccountably not settled until as late as 1889 when a cook in a camp of rabbiters made a crude dissection of a specimen, which he forwarded to Stirling, showing the embryo in transit through a median canal (Frith and Calaby 1968: 102–103). Thus, while the non-scientist might be led into error over certain matters, they might also perceive facts hidden from—or unacceptable to—the scientific community (Dugan 1980: 57).

Discovery of the Gorilla

Definite knowledge of the African gorilla is relatively recent. The eventual identification of crania and other skeletal parts belonging to the gorilla was due to the enterprise of the American missionaries Savage and Wilson in collaboration with the anatomists Wyman and Owen. The publication by Savage and Wyman in 1847, the first scientific account of the gorilla, deeply stirred scientific interest. Du Chaillu, to whom Montgomery wrongly attributes the discovery, was mainly responsible for later bringing the gorilla to the attention of the world. Yet why was the animal discovered so late? Of early references, Hanno's description from the 5th century B.C. was perhaps inapplicable, although an unidentified ape mentioned by Battell in 1625 was surely a gorilla. Buffon was acquainted with the writings of Battell, but unfortunately confused the issue by the misapplication of names, and so for decades delayed the scientific discovery of the gorilla (Yerkes and Yerkes 1929: 382).

An account contained in Monboddo's work of 1774 ought to have stirred naturalists to a determined search for the gorilla, but it did not do so. Even an unmistakeable reference by Bowdich in 1819 failed to lead to the discovery of the ape. Savage and Wyman noted the failure of naturalists to recognize a second species of large ape in Africa (after the chimpanzee), but attributed this to the absence of any evidence on which its existence might be predicated other than vague statements of travellers. These, resting upon information derived from natives and not on personal observation of the narrator, were said by the authors to be so mingled with absurd and marvellous accounts that they were deservedly regarded as unworthy of credence.

At the same time, Savage and Wyman asserted that their anatomical description of the gorilla would most satisfactorily confirm the statements of Battell and Bowdich (Yerkes and Yerkes 1929: 32).

There appears, however, to be a certain contradiction, first in supposing that the early accounts were altogether incredible, and then in supposing that the final discovery neatly confirmed them. In any case, Montgomery's suggestion that the gorilla's discovery arose from a search following upon a comparison of reports was incorrect.

Formal scientific recognition for the gorilla depended upon the availability of anatomical evidence, but failure to clarify the issues involved might have impeded the process. In 1852, Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire published a note on the gorilla in which he tells us that his father had since 1828 suspected a second type of African ape, but that for nineteen years nothing had confirmed his prediction at a time when most other naturalists still doubted its existence. The greatest authority of the time, Cuvier, went so far in his book *Le Rène Animal Distribué d'Après son Organisation* of 1817 as to deny categorically the gorilla's existence, a condemnation repeated in the edition of 1829. He thereby retarded considerably the date of its discovery.

After Cuvier's death in 1832, the climate of incredulity which he had encouraged continued to prevail. To such an extent, it appears, that when in 1836 material evidence in the form of a mutilated skin was brought back from Gabon by a sea captain named Thouret, no one dared to see in it proof of the existence of Battell's large ape (Heuvelmans 1980: 281–283). This skin presumably belonged to the young animal referred to by Savage and Wyman, who say only that it was not known whether the skeleton was preserved (Yerkes and Yerkes 1929: 32–33).

Enter the Yahoo

We come at last to a consideration of the Australian "ape," and of Harper's account of it. According to Kuhn, and in opposition to the view of Montgomery, novelty in science emerges only with difficulty, and the unexpected will at first be ignored or forced into conformity with accepted views of the world. An inclination by scientists to pass over Harper's description, or at best to see in that lurid scene the translation to an Australian setting of a passage from du Chaillu, is therefore understandable. A rational approach, however, might accept that there are several good reasons for transcending such indifference.

First, references to an Australian "ape" precede formal discovery of the gorilla, and there was evidently debate among Australian naturalists on the question long before the public became aware of that African ape (Joyner 1977: 6). Secondly, Harper's account had been preceded by an exceptionally large number of references to the subject (far more, for example, than in the case of the gorilla prior to 1847), all of which were either ignored or over-

looked by Australian scientists. Among these were detailed descriptions from the same area by Osborne (Joyner 1977: 1) in 1871 and McCooey (Joyner 1986: 1) in 1882, the latter ridiculed by Ramsay, Curator of the Australian Museum (Joyner 1986: 6). Reports from elsewhere in the southern ranges included a description of an animal killed in 1893 near Braidwood (Joyner 1977: 10, 11) and there were also reports from further to the north like that of Telfer in 1900 (Millis 1980: 55, 56). Together the reports show a considerable degree of consistency among physical details (Joyner 1989).

A third reason is provided by Montgomery's presentation, or rather, in some respects, his silence. Oddly enough, given his intentions, Montgomery refrained from comment on Harper's story. The best indication that it was entirely Harper's own and intended to be believed lies in the fact that Montgomery makes no suggestion to the contrary. In addition, Montgomery left unstated his objections to the idea of such an animal, allowing a suspicion that he had none of any substance. A fourth consideration is that Harper (1840–1930) was in a position to know what he was talking about, having worked as a surveyor in or around the region concerned, first at Bombala and then at Moruya, for some fifty years. Only a few months before (see the *Moruya Examiner* of 16 March 1912, p. 2) he had been forced to camp out in the ranges in much the same circumstances as when he made his sighting.

Finally, certain minor features of the tale compel our attention. Harper's contention that the existence of such an animal was known to the Aborigines is supported by a note about the *dooligal*—an Aboriginal name for the Yahoo—made by the linguist R. H. Mathews at the turn of the century (Joyner 1977: 23). Recent linguistic surveys (Hercus 1969, Kelloway Eades 1976) throw further light upon the matter, even though they do not consider relevant historical data. Next, Harper's remark about timber getters is worth noting because it remains amenable to confirmation. For instance, I have a letter dated February 20, 1978, from Mrs. Eileen Pittman of Bega, a part Aboriginal woman who had lived all her life on the south coast between Nowra and Bega. After providing some stories of a familiar kind about Aborigines and the *dulagarl,* she added: "My Uncle Bill Taylor was a sleeper cutter up in the mountains near Braidwood. He said they often saw them at the camp eating all the scraps. Bill Taylor is a white man."

Another matter of interest is the physical description of the animal, particularly the assertion that it was equipped with two long canine teeth which protruded over the lower lip when the mouth was closed. While there appears to be no precedent for this depiction, the remark is at least open to interpretation. For example, the description might well apply to two separated incisors, like those possessed by the late Pleistocene diprotodontid *Hulitherium tomasettii.* This was a large marsupial—ecologically equivalent to the mountain gorilla in Africa, the giant panda in China, or the spectacled bear in South America—which formerly inhabited montane rain forests in Papua New Guinea. *H. tomasettii* may have been capable of an upright, bear-like or panda-like posture (Flannery and Plane 1986).

Where there existed among scientists no awareness of anomaly, no recognition that something was amiss, then this failure could itself prohibit development of discovery until such time as observational data might be matched by the requisite conceptualization. The case of the Queensland lungfish (*Neoceradotus forsteri*) also exemplifies this. In 1870, Gerard Krefft, then Curator of the Australian Museum, published a description of what he called one of the most interesting animals ever to be discovered in Australia, and he conjectured that the discovery would take the scientific world by surprise. Krefft (1870) found that the Queensland lungfish possessed a dentition unlike other lungfishes, but ressembling that of certain fossil sharks. The skeleton was part bone, part cartilage, the backbone being pure cartilage. Krefft noted how strange it was that this curious creature, well known to the settlers at Wide Bay and other Queensland districts, should so long have escaped the eyes of those interested in natural history.

For at least ten years prior to his announcement, however, Krefft had been tantalized by stories of the fish about once a week when dining with William Forster, then Minister for Lands in the New South Wales government (Whitley 1929). Krefft (1870) believed Forster must have been mistaken in describing a fish with a cartilaginous backbone. At length, under the influence of repeated affirmations, Krefft relented sufficiently to demand proof. Forster thereupon asked his nephew W. F. McCord, an enthusiastic naturalist, to dispatch specimens from the Burnett River, which duly arrived and had the intended effect (Perry 1928: 177, Whitley 1929). Krefft later apologized for questioning Forster's observations (see the *Sydney Morning Herald,* January 18, 1870, p. 5). Yet, for at least a decade, the Queensland lungfish remained unknown to science because Krefft could not believe that such a fish might exist.

Conclusions

Zoology in 19th century Australia provides an opportunity for an historiographic re-orientation of the nature of science. This suggests how unsatisfactory was the simple cumulative view of scientific innovation which prevailed, and how frequently a phenomenon went unremarked upon by scientists because it lay beyond their expectations.

Of the Yahoo itself, it can be said that its discovery was never resolved, and that the restrictive attitude of contemporary science contributed to the lack of a solution. A similar restriction of vision is found in recent demands for a mundane or commonplace solution (e.g., Smith, 1989: 30). But there are important distinctions evident in the history of 19th century Australian zoology which are not so apparent in the physical sciences, concerned as they are to a greater extent with causal analysis and common observation.

The distinctions are those between the fixed and the transient, between the views of European scientists (and frequently their Australian counterparts) on the one hand, and those of settlers, colonial naturalists, and the Aborigines on the other, and between the requirements of comparative anatomy and the field observations which might complement them. It was perhaps a unique combination of considerations like these as much as the nature of scientific discovery or the novelty of Australian animals which have shaped the distortions characteristic of Australian zoological history.

Postscript

It has been correctly pointed out by Groves (1989) that the imagery and language used to describe the Yahoo are invariably drawn from the hominids or the larger apes, particularly the gorilla. Groves has further suggested that the title of my 1977 book *The Hairy Man of South Eastern Australia* is perhaps evidence that I then thought in terms of a hominid/hominoid solution. But this is not so.

The limitations of thought and language require that anything new be described in terms of what is already familiar. Any large creature that stood on two feet (such as a bear) might be man-like, but the resemblance need not be—and obviously often is not—more than superficial. Designations like "Hairy Man," "Australian Gorilla," or "Tasmanian Tiger" are merely names, not descriptions.

It has never seemed to me possible that the words "Hairy Man" referred to an unknown hominoid (that is, a placental primate) because (1) there were obvious geographical difficulties, and (2) some of the recurring features described (such as the shape of the foot and the existence of claws or long nails) could hardly belong to a hominoid. In the foreword to my book, I explained that the work was an inquiry into what the expression "Hairy Man" might mean, but that I was then unable to supply an answer.

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